

Preserving Old Bangkok

The University of Hawaii's Asian Preservation Field School

Bangkok, Thailand was the study site of the University of Hawaii's 1997 Asian Preservation Field School from July 5 through August 1, under the direction of the author. Originally scheduled for Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the program was reorganized at the last minute as a result of the political turmoil in Cambodia and the potential threat to student safety.

As a result of these events, the nine University of Hawaii and associated mainland and international students spent a full month in Bangkok and its environs investigating problems in the conservation of urban sites. This included an intensive look at Bangkok's many varieties of traditional shop-houses, a building form common throughout urban Southeast Asia. Aided considerably by the Fine Arts Department of the Bureau of Archaeology and National Museums in Thailand, students conducted an inventory of shop-houses in the Banglampoo area of the city. They also completed measured drawings of a number of buildings, including interior drawings of a virtually intact, early-20th-century Chinese apothecary.

In addition to their work in the city of Bangkok, students traveled to Ayutthaya to assist

in a Fine Arts Department project. Working with faculty member Doosadee Thaitakoo from Chulalongkorn University, as well as Vira Rojpojchanarat, Pichea Boonpinon, Saowalux Phongsatha, and Manatchaya Wajvisoot, all from the Fine Arts Department, students looked at both rural and urban examples of vernacular architecture. In all, three days were spent in Ayutthaya.

Students had considerable opportunity to visit sites in Bangkok as part of their introduction to the project. These included tours of the Grand Palace and Wat Phra Keo, separate tours of Wat Pho, Wat Arun and also a visit to King Rama V's lavish Viminek Palace, also known as the Teak Palace; Suan Pakkard Palace, another private residence, now a house museum; Jim Thompson's House, the one-time home of the famous expatriate American silk merchant; and the Siam Society's house and grounds in Sukhumvit. These excursions provided additional background and helped students understand the preservation activities in Thailand.

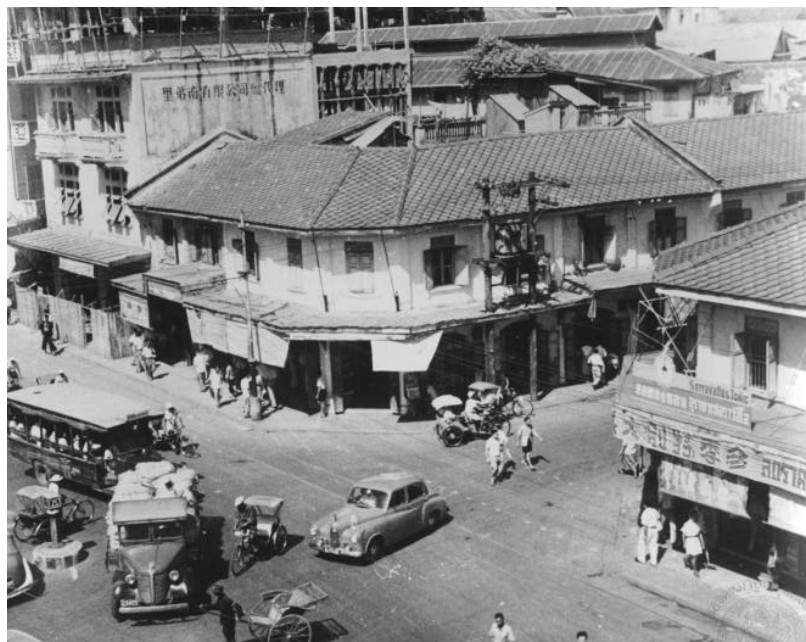
In Bangkok the program was assisted by the Siam Society and its Director of Communications, Thomas Van Blarcom. Students were introduced to the work of the Society and had a personal tour of

the Society's collections, including the Kamthieng House, by Mr. Van Blarcom.

Throughout the program, lectures on conservation treatments, Buddhist art and symbolism, and Thai vernacular architecture supplemented on-site work. Students also listened to lectures and presentations by leading preservation practitioners. The formal course was followed up by individual excursions and study trips to Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Sukkothai.

The program was significant especially in that it focused on some of Southeast Asia's most fragile historic resources: 19th- and early-

*Shop-houses,
Bangkok, c. 1950.
Courtesy National
Archives, Bangkok,
Thailand.*



Shop-houses near the Asian Field School project area, Banglampoo, Bangkok, 1997. Photo courtesy the author.



20th-century commercial and residential buildings. Considered by a growing number of both international and local scholars as the building blocks of Southeast Asian cities, Chinese-inspired shop-houses (typically with Western-derived architectural elements) and the even more common vernacular wood architecture of the region have up to now been given less attention by national programs more intent on the preservation of palaces and pagodas. It is hoped that the University of Hawaii's continuing Asian preservation field schools can help to highlight this important legacy.

The students attending the course were a very diverse group, including Ricarda Lynn Cepeda and Annie Flores from the Guam Historic Preservation Office; Eric Hill, a University of Hawaii graduate student in urban and regional planning and East West Center scholar; Hiroyo Kurokawa, a Japanese student in planning from the University of Buffalo; David Rossing, a graduate landscape architecture student from the University of Wisconsin; Rob Vaughn, a University

of Hawaii American studies Ph. D. student; Peter Zabielskis, a Ph. D. candidate in anthropology at New York University; and Christine Su-Leonard, an American studies doctoral student and also an East West scholar.

David Scott, Director of Historic Hawaii Foundation, attended the course as both a student and part-time instructor. In addition, he investigated future study areas and established what we believe will be lasting contacts with local preservation organizations. Plans are currently under-

way to repeat the Asia Field School in Bangkok in July-August 1998. Working with the regional training organization, SPAFA (The Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organizational Regional Center for Archaeology and Fine Arts), the University of Hawaii intends to join forces with architects and planners from the government's Fine Arts Department and conduct a summer survey of urban resources. Funding permitting, we hope to include students from Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma, Vietnam, and, especially, Cambodia in the program.

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Further information may be obtained on our world wide web site: <<http://www2.hawaii.edu/amst/histpres.html>>, or you may contact: Historic Preservation Program, Department of American Studies, University of Hawaii at Mānoa, 1890 East West Road, Moore 324, Honolulu, HI 96822; tel: 808.956.9546; fax: 808.956.4733

American and Thai students at Ayutthaya. Photo courtesy the author.

